Fundamental Concepts
Module 2 Section 4
Lecture 11

Let us continue with our theme of unpacking ethnography. In this section, we would like to discuss its other major component: the concepts that form the fundamental structure of ethnographic research.

Along with the process, the method is composed of certain principles that guide its process and give ethnography its particular way of seeing.

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These ideas and concepts define how and what we see when we set out on our investigation, and how we understand or interpret our findings. The approach by which we arrive at our data is as important as the data itself. These principles are the core characteristics or attributes of the ethnographic method. Let us understand these concepts in greater detail.

As we have seen so far, the experiences and learnings that form the raw material of our research are gathered *in the field*, that is., in the context where the phenomena we are studying occur naturally, or where they commonly occur. This makes ethnography a *naturalistic* form of research. Moreover, it has to be conducted in the time in which the phenomenon is takings place. It cannot be a study of something from the past, or forecasting of the future. It is in the here and now.

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Therefore *synchronic*; meaning a research situated in the present. This is why it emphasises *being present* at the immediate site and at the time of the occurrence.

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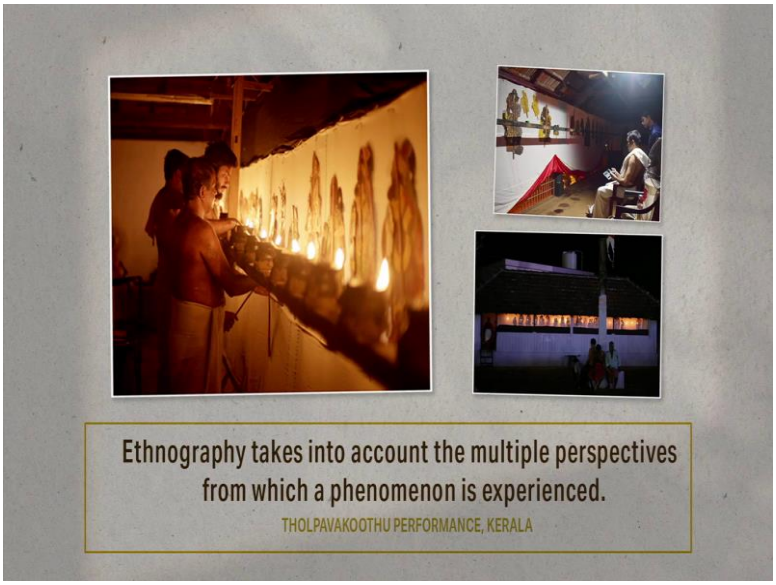

When we experience events in the context *as they occur*, we also understand the various perspectives of others who are involved in it *and how they experience the event*. To be present is not simply to turn up on the field. An important characteristic of ethnographic practice is to pay attention to the most minute and mundane details of our participants' lives.

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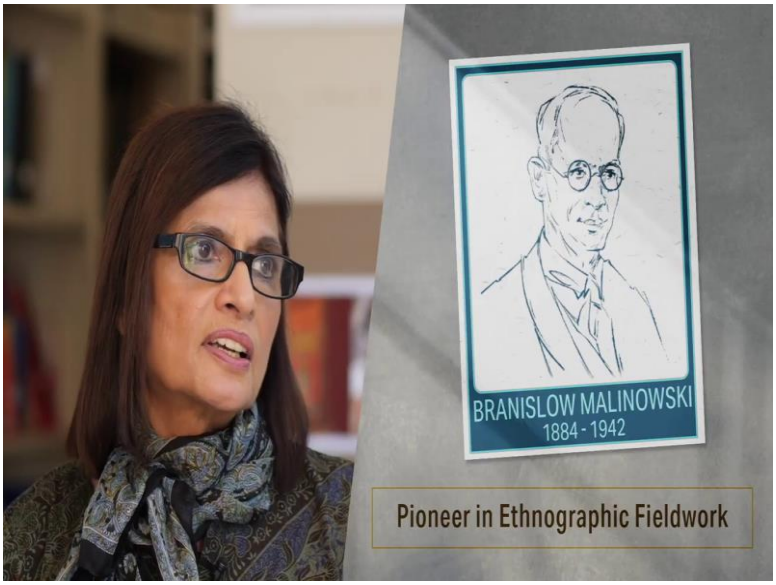

Here, let us turn to someone who is often credited with laying down some of the founding principles of ethnographic practice, Bronislaw Malinowski

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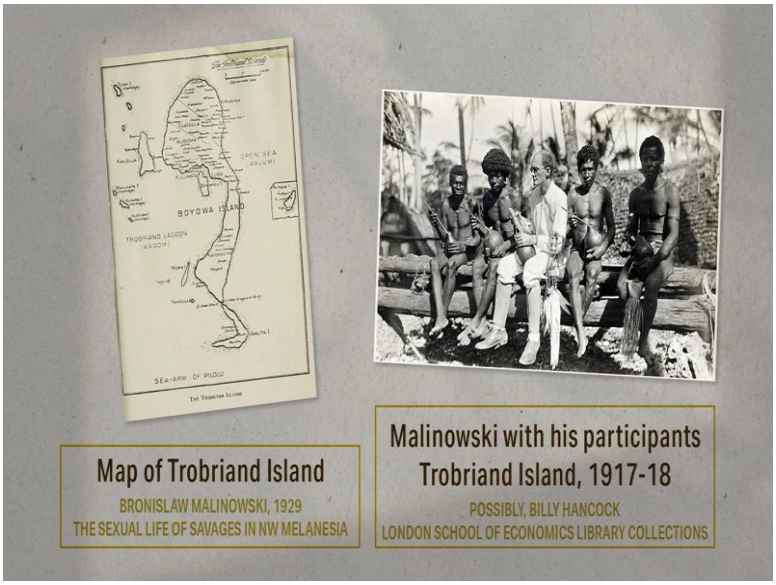

. Malinowski was an Austrian anthropologist, who did some of his most significant work in the Trobriand Islands, off the coast of New Guinea in the early 1900s. He put forth the idea that the work of the ethnographer is to gather and make sense of what he called ***'the imponderabilia of actual life'.*** Let us hear it from the man himself.

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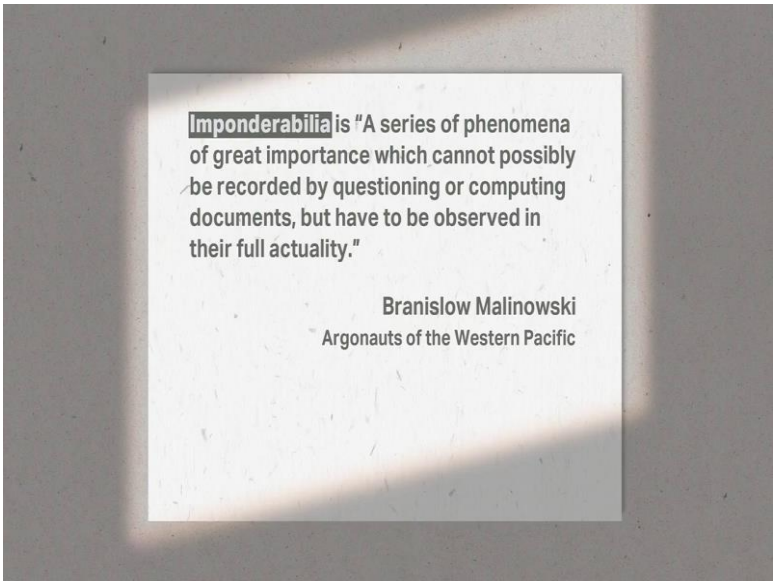

The imponderabilia of everyday life is "A series of phenomena of great importance which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality." And to illustrate what he means, here is an example of his own recordings.

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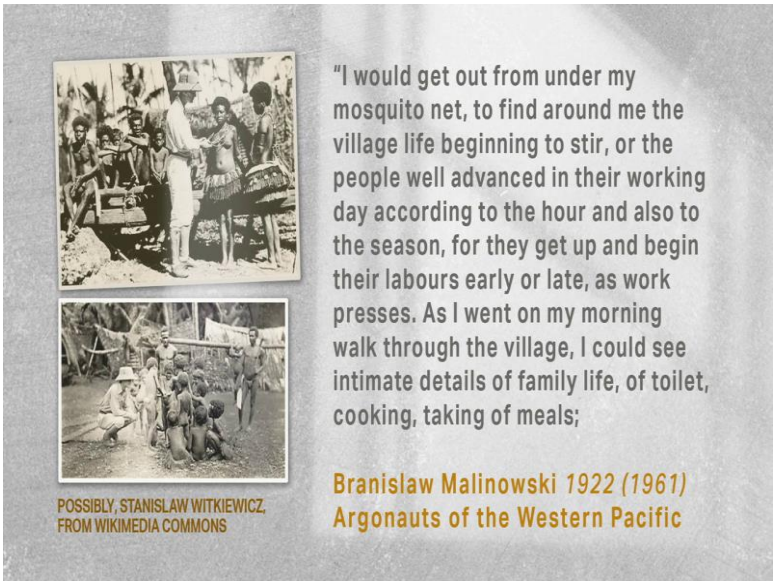

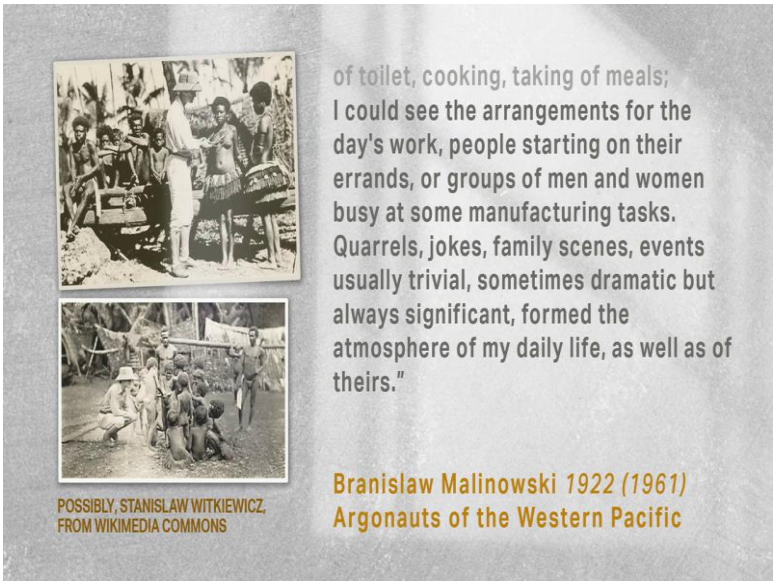

I would get out from under my mosquito net, to find around me the village life beginning to stir, or the people well advanced in their working day according to the hour and also to the season, for they get up and begin their labours early or late as work presses. As I went on my morning walk through the village, I could see intimate details of family life, of toilet, cooking, taking of meals, I could see the arrangements for the day's work, people starting on their errands, or groups of men and women busy at some manufacturing tasks. Quarrels, jokes, family scenes, events usually trivial, sometimes dramatic but always significant, formed the atmosphere of my daily life as well as of theirs.

But why this insistence on imponderabilia? Why is it so central to our work? Let's see if you can find the answer to that in our discussion on the contextual and descriptive nature of ethnography.

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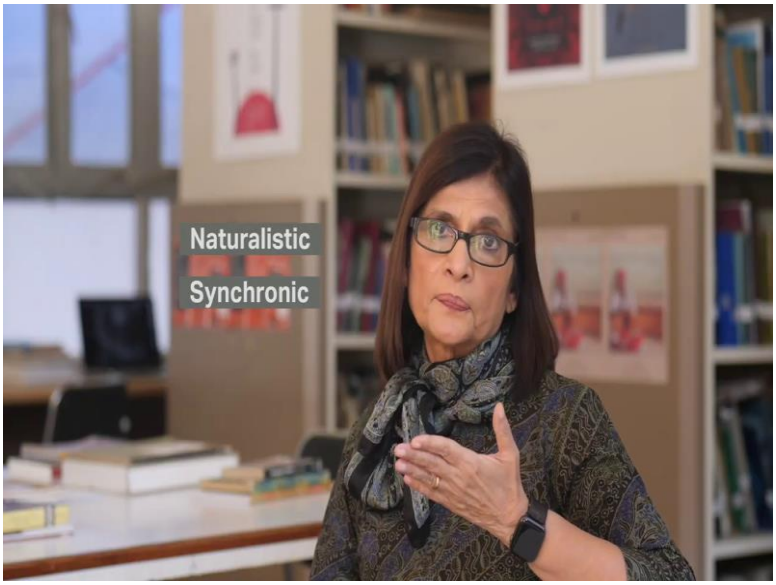

We have spoken about how ethnography is naturalistic and synchronic. and can only be gathered if we are present in the setting and at the time when the phenomenon occurs. This means that ethnography is inextricably bound to the context. It is, therefore, a *contextual* form of research. As ethnographers, we do not simply just list down the events that we observe. Our task is to analyse our observations and derive meaning from them. This can only happen if we expand our understanding of the context.

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Context here does not only refer to what we see or sense as the immediate physical setting of the phenomenon. It is also made up of intangible factors such as social hierarchies and dynamics, beliefs and behaviours. The history of a place or a group forms part of their context. And so does their material world, such as, what technologies do they use and what kind of trades are they involved in?

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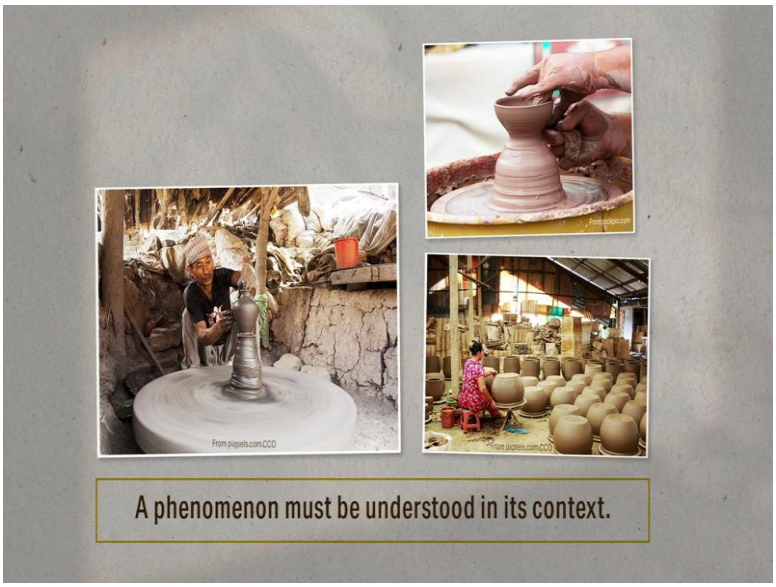

For a community of potters, the context is composed of their environment- where and how they live. It consists of the craft they practice and how they make a living from it. This connects them to other communities to whom they sell their wares and from whom they get their raw material. It includes their position in the social

structure of their village or town- their class and caste positions, for instance. And it includes the social structure of the community itself- what the gender relations are, what the family structure is like, and so on.

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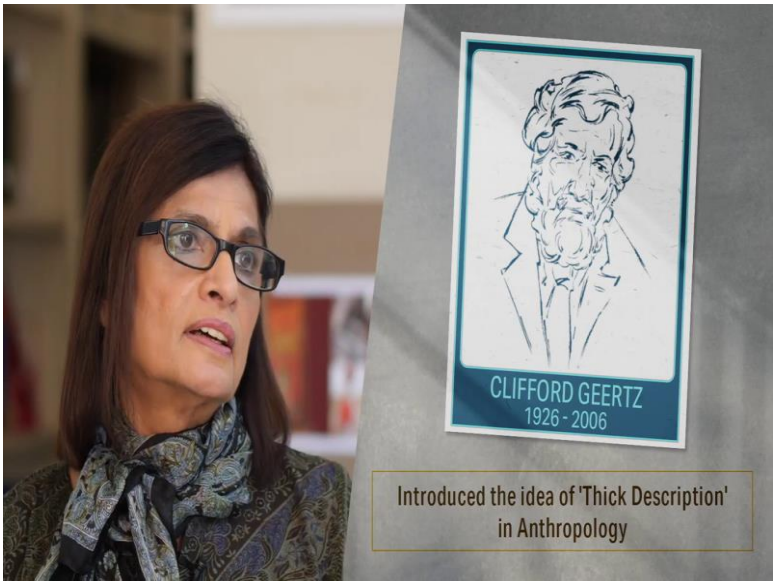

To understand this expanded idea of context a bit more, let us bring in another key figure in ethnography: Clifford Geertz. Geertz articulated and even redefined much of ethnography and its 'way of seeing' in the 1970s and 1980s.

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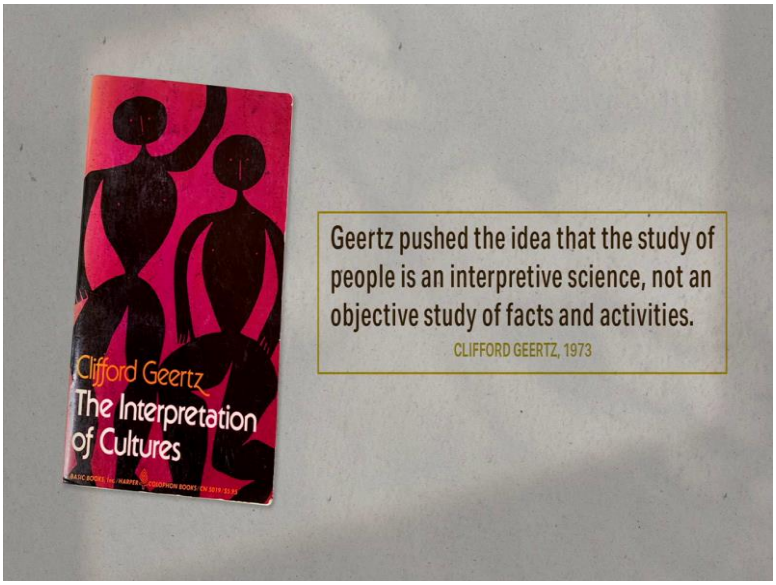

Geertz insisted that in understanding the context of a community, ethnographers must look at the meanings that underlie their everyday practices. These meanings, he said, signify how people experience and perceive their world. Geertz referred to the

collection or the intricate web of such meanings as ***culture***.

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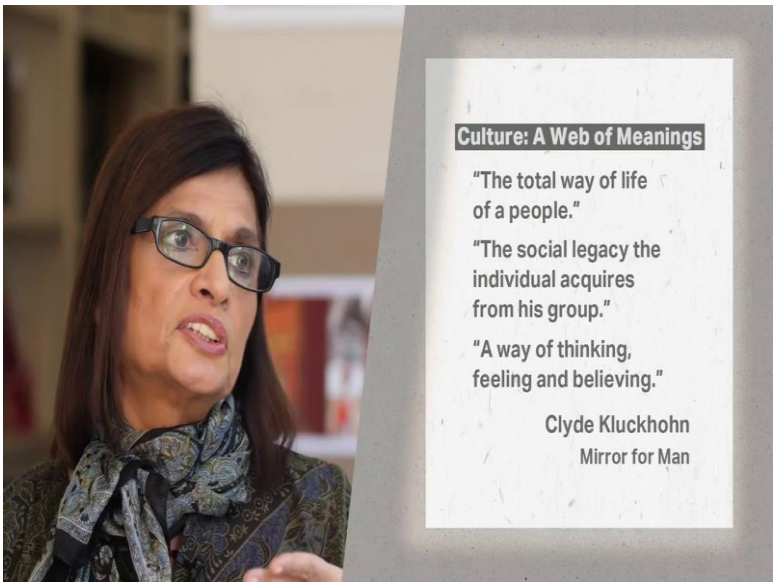

Culture has been defined in many different ways. So the ways in which we dress, our food habits, our ways of interacting with others - all these small ways of behaving constitute the culture that we are a part of. But more significantly, the ways in which we think, feel and form beliefs, these factors that define our ways of dressing, eating and so on, are what Geertz terms culture. Take, for example, our collective history of being colonised. That forms a part of our culture.

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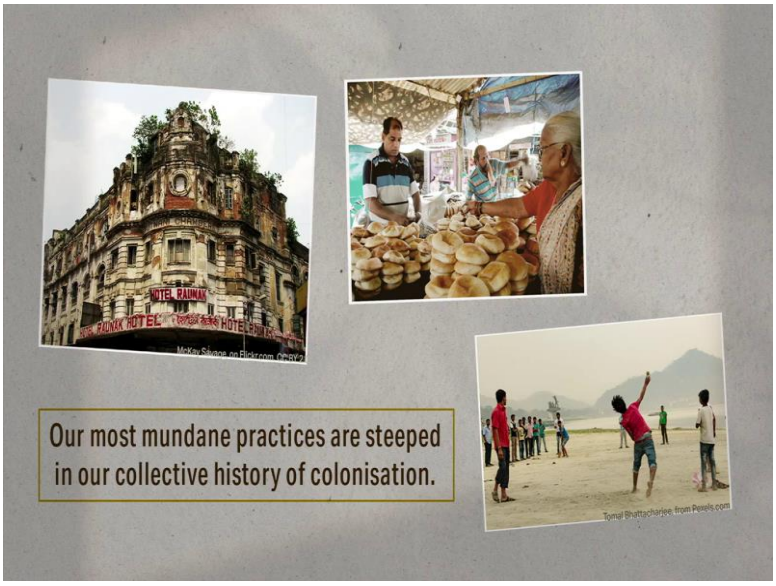

In case of a smaller group, like an educational institute, the collective importance given to punctuality, or the comfort or cordiality that students feel in approaching

their teachers- that is part of culture too. It is this culture that translates into the observable, perceivable behaviour such as the conversations that take place between students and teachers.

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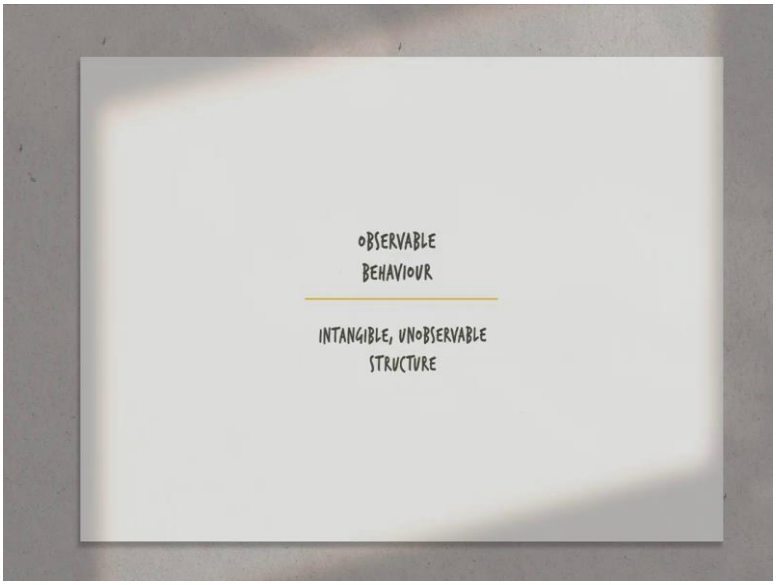

Geertz suggests that in doing ethnography, we need to understand the underlying culture that gives rise to observable behaviour.

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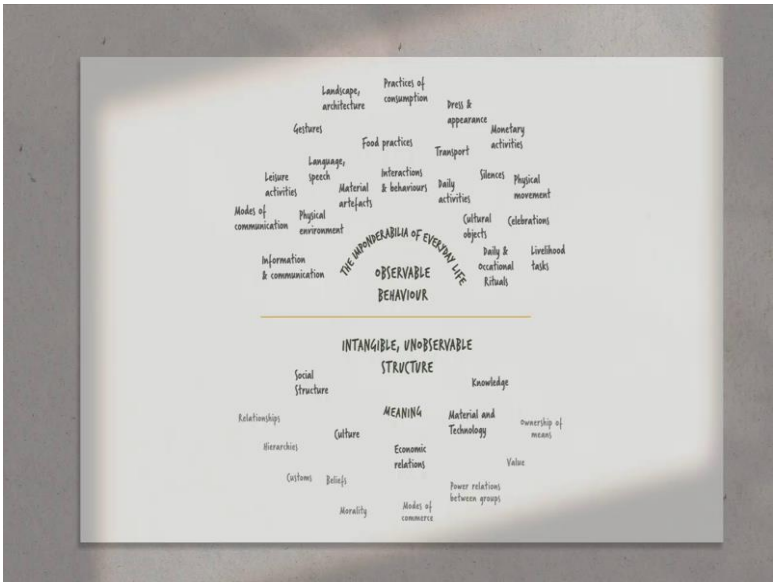

This is important, he says, because human behaviour can be seen as a set of actions, each action symbolising some underlying meaning. This meaning is based on how we, as a social group, collectively understand that action- what it symbolises, what associations we build around it. We observe behaviours and interactions and

interrogate them for what they are for what they reveal- the social structure, the symbolism, the associations connected to them. These form the context in which the action is to be understood. By understanding these, we try to understand the *meaning* of the observed behaviours.

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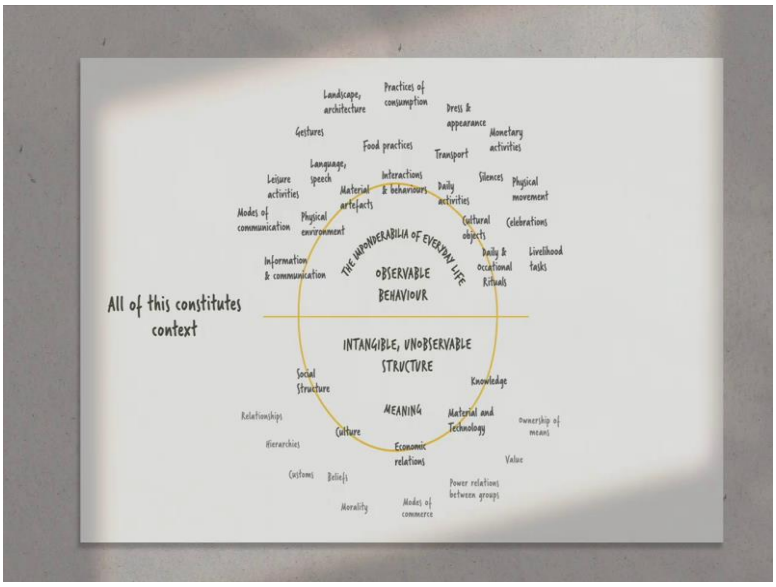

The context is made of imponderabilia that makes up our everyday worlds, the underlying beliefs, norms and hierarchies that form the social structure, and the web of meanings which is culture. Let us take an example of a behaviour and reflect on how we may understand its meaning.

Consider the infamous Indian head wobble. The action itself can mean multiple things. It sometimes means "yes", sometimes "no", sometimes "maybe". Sometimes it is just a way of acknowledging another's presence, or what they said. And ever so often, it is just an absent-minded "hmmm". As ethnographers, though, how do we decipher its meaning?

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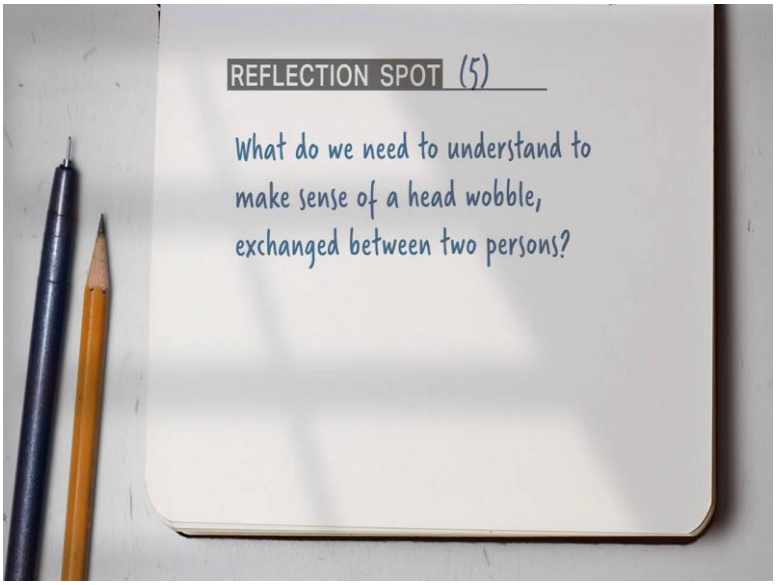

What all do we need to understand in order to make sense of a head wobble, exchanged between two persons. Write down all the factors that you can think of. In order to understand what a *particular* head wobble means, we need to know the various meanings that the wobble has in that culture. We need to also know the immediate context in which that particular wobble took place, its imponderabilia.

And we might also need to understand something of the persons between whom the wobble was exchanged. All of these small and large, immediate and invisible factors form the context of the wobble and define its meaning.

In our everyday lives, we experience many such small behaviours and gestures. We understand their meaning without a thought because we belong to this culture and speak the same cultural language. We are embedded in the context. As ethnographers, however, we must step outside of what we know, and explore how these meanings are constructed.